





HIC SPECIAL
Novels
小説

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静寂の中優美な声を聞き、
見わず振り返ったスヴィン、
だがそこにはいたのは、
記憶の中の少女ではなかった……

「ジエハを見さんのお悩み相談室」とその接觸、
幼き頃のあの日、メガオンはハグとともに、
お忍びで手を城下町へ連れ出した。
活気に満ちた街を二人で歩いたあの日を、
待望のノベル化です……!!

（同じ月の下で）



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prologue

*When darkness falls upon the land,
the dragon's blood will restore life once more.
In accordance with the ancient pact,
when the Four Dragons are gathered,
the sword and shield that protect the king will awaken,
and the red dragon will return at dawn.¹*

Yun had first heard this prophecy in the early days after meeting Yona. Back then Hak was the only one with her, and after barely escaping with their lives from Hiruyū castle, dodging the Fire Tribe's soldiers, the two of them were covered in wounds. Hak, especially, was seriously injured, and when Yun found them at the bottom of a cliff he was almost at death's door. If he had treated them just a little later, surely they would not be here today.

“You have Lord Hak supporting you. However, at this rate, he will die.”

So announced Ik-Soo, the priest, and Hak immediately objected. Yona, however, took these words a lot more seriously; Hak's wounds and their journey up until now had most likely forced her to. Looking at her profile even Yun, who had not known her for long, understood that well enough. Even so, accepting Ik-Soo's proposition – that was lacking in any mention of destination – was a different matter entirely.

“You need allies. You must seek out the Four Dragon Warriors.”

¹ Manga chapter 13, Anime episode 7. Translation taken from the official crunchyroll subtitles of the anime, slightly adapted.

They were dealing with "legends" here; it was essentially asking for the impossible. Such were Yun's thoughts, but Yona was set on not letting Hak die. As he watched this side of her closely, Yun too had begun to believe that finding the Four Dragon Warriors might not be impossible.

And in the end we actually did find them.

He looked forward and saw the group chattering as they walked, as always. With Yun himself included they were a party of seven – well, seven and a little one. The one often referred to as Pukkyū, a small carnivorous creature named Ao, was a legitimate member of the group too. The memory of her biting through their ropes when Yona and Yun infiltrated Kumji's ship in Awa was still fresh in his mind.

Though normally she's just a big glutton...

Even now, as he took a glimpse sideways, he could see her on Yona's shoulders with puffed up cheeks munching on something.

On the topic of things far from normal, there were also the Four Dragons to mention: the *Hakuryū*, Kija; the *Seiryū*, Shin-ah; the *Ryokuryū*, Jae-ha; and the *Ouryū*, Zeno, whom had appeared out of nowhere just the other day. They possessed powers beyond belief and had proved to be mighty warriors. Surprisingly enough, along with Yona and the rest, they could also easily put up small performances that would baffle even entertainers, but then again all except Jae-ha were actually just a bunch of airheads.

Well Zeno doesn't have any powers, so he doesn't really feel like a warrior...

Still, they had managed to accomplish their initial mission. Unsure of what this troupe should do now that

they had gathered the Four Dragon Warriors, the need to visit Ik-Soo once again and ask him about the prophecy's meaning arose.

What bothers me the most is who this "king" in the prophecy is supposed to be...

Was it Yona, or was it perhaps the current king Su-Won?

Depending on its interpretation, the route they would take could change drastically.

"Hey Yun, don't you think the clouds look rather strange?"

Upon getting called on so suddenly, Yun jumped in surprise. At his reaction, Yona, who was peeking at him, gasped apologetically.

"Sorry, where you lost in thought?"

"...Not really, just wondering what I should make for dinner tonight. More importantly, the weather *does* look fishy. At this rate I think we'll have a shower on us."

Thinking he had to warn the others, Yun began walking with a longer stride. Yona nodded, and easily kept up with his pace.

Just a while ago she had no endurance whatsoever, and now look at her.

Just how much effort had she made to get this far? Perhaps Yun, who had travelled together with her – and possibly even Hak too – were not completely aware of it all.

And to think when we first met I thought she was just an ignorant princess...

Now Yun felt that he wanted to support Yona, who kept her struggles to herself², with all his strength. Surely

²背中で語る (*senaka de kataru*) is a Japanese expression meaning "to talk through one's back". Japanese don't tend to openly speak about their emotions, so it's said they express it through body language

he must have been very blissful having met someone that would make him feel this way.

As he unintentionally looked sideways, he watched her short crimson hair sway in the breeze. How he wished for the day that her hair would again grow long would come. With such thoughts on his mind, Yun called out to Hak and the others.

Their destination was the Wind Tribe's territory, towards the valley in the northern mountains.

instead for others to see. The use of this expression here suggests Yona is carrying a heavy load on her shoulders and not telling others about it.

big brother
jae-ha's
counselling room

"Don't you think we should make good use of our time?"

Jae-ha's serious voice echoed abruptly through the cave they had entered to shelter themselves from the rain. They stopped brushing the water off their hair and clothes and looked up at him; once he had made sure all eyes were on him, Jae-ha gestured gracefully towards the cave's entrance.

"Take a look outside. With clouds like these the rain won't stop in a while, right?"

"...Well, I guess so. But what do you suggest we do?" Yun thought he might as well hear him out, but the moment he spoke up it dawned on him: simply ignoring him would have been the best option.

This is definitely, probably, without a doubt in the world, not going to be anything decent!

Perhaps aware, or unaware, of Yun's thoughts, Jae-ha lowered his droopy eyes even further and smiled, continued in a pretentious manner:

"You see, in times like these we should do things we normally can't do."

The silence lasted but for a moment.

Yona, who in all honesty had taken his words at face value, tilted her head sideways as she said, "Something we can't normally do...you mean like a word-chain game¹?"

"No, that's not really something we have to decide on so rigidly," said Yun in an exasperated tone of voice.

Kija spoke up from behind him immediately, his fiery eyes shining so brightly one could see them even in the dimly lit cave: "Do you not understand the Princess's

¹ しりとり (shiritor) is a Japanese word-chain game where each player is required to say a word that starts with the previous word's last kana (syllable). The game ends when somebody says a word ending with the kana ん, N, as no Japanese word starts with that character.

thoughts? As Jac-ha just said, we should make good use of our time. It is precisely because we would not normally do something like this that we should do it now.”

“And play word-chain games? Why?”

“Why? Well, because...i-it will deepen our friendship.”

“That all sounds very convincing, but what about Shin-ah?”

Within this group of rather vociferous members, Shin-ah alone rarely said a word. Though they had achieved a minimum level of communication, word-chain games were out of the question.

Oh, but I guess we should ask him just in case...

Yun glanced towards the entrance, where the person in question stood watching over them from afar, still wringing his pelt. Seeing as he had sharp ears he had most certainly heard their entire exchange so far. Shin-ah met Yun’s eyes through his mask and shook his head.

“Pukyuu—!”

Before Yun could point out how pointless this all was, Ao’s voice echoed throughout the cave. She jumped off Shin-ah’s shoulder and ran up to Yona.

“See? Shin-ah has Ao, so it’ll be fine.”

Yona let Ao climb onto her palm, and, as she brought her up close to her face, smiled.

“...You do realise that means whoever comes before Ao has to end their words in ‘pu’, right?”

“Wow! The difficulty sure went up a level quickly!” exclaimed Zeno in a cheerful voice that contrasted with the groan Kija let out, furrowing his eyebrows.

“Don’t worry about the silly little details! It’ll work out as we go about it~” he added.

“Right? It definitely will!”

“You say some very inspiring things every once in a while!”

No no, this doesn't solve anything at all, you hear me??

Just as Yun was about retort in response to Yona and Kija's magnificent all out display of their natural puerility, Zeno raised his hand and said in a jolly playful voice, “Okay then, Zeno'll go first! If you think of ‘ka’, it's gotta be *kaa-chan*²!”

“Oh my, the game's already over.”

“At least try letting everybody have a go! Why on earth did you go with ‘ka’?!” said Yun, finally managing to get a retort in.

Exhausted, he threw himself down on the cloth that was laid on the ground. Across from him, Hak, who so far had been watching the scene quietly, seemed like he too wanted to say something in response to the previous exchange. He walked away from the wall he was leaning on and with a deep sigh and stood before Yona.

“We're already uncomfortable enough with these wet clothes, so could you please avoid bringing down the atmosphere even further?”³

Hak and Yun were on the same page about this, but the one he was talking to was no other than Yona. As one would expect from her, she looked up at Hak with pure

²母ちゃん (kaa-chan) / お母ちゃん(okaa-chan), meaning mum or mother. Note that the word ends with the kana ァ, N.

³ This is an exchange a little hard to explain. What Hak is really saying is: “We're already cold enough, so could you please avoid saying things that drop the temperature even lower?”. In Japanese it's often said that when a bad joke is told, or when a dense person doesn't get what is being said, the temperature in the room drops. Though it is possible to say this in English and have it make sense, I decided to adapt it a bit.

eyes and asked, puzzled, "How would that bring down the atmosphere?"

"Argh! Explaining why would make it even more awkward!" shouted Yun; he was reaching the limits of his patience, and glared at the culprit behind this.

Jae-ha, who had assumed the role of a spectator to the show, had been clutching his stomach in laughter for a while.

"Jae-ha! Do something about this! It's because you always say these half-baked suggestive lines that it turns out like this!"

"R-Right...haha. It's just it turned into something so cute...hahaha...that I thought it'd be such a waste to put an end to it..."

"I don't want to hear your excuses! If you don't stop laughing right now, I'll have the Thunder Beast never kick you, hit you, or tie you up ever again!"

"Oh, I can't have that happening."

Hak opened his mouth to say something about that, but Jae-ha suppressed his laughter quicker than he could comment.

"So? What is it that we can't normally do that you suggest we do now?"

Not just Yun, but Yona and all others now too looked towards Jae-ha with immense interest. Even Shin-ah, who had finished wringing out his wet furs, had silently approached them. The only exception was Hak, who had gone back to leaning against the wall, his sharp gaze pointed downwards. Jae-ha sent an amused glance his way, and then spread out his arms.

"We're a group of young men and women cohabiting and travelling together! There *must* be various things on

your mind about that! No, it'd be just plain odd for you not to have any! And worries should be taken care of quickly!"

"...So?"

Had Yun gone ahead and commented on everything they would've never got down to the point. He held back his thoughts and reluctantly urged Jae-ha to continue. Jae-ha nodded exaggeratedly and boldly announced in a loud voice:

"Thus! I hereby declare 'Big Brother Jae-ha's Counselling Room' open for its very first sessio—"

Wham!

Yun had no clue as to what had just happened. Hak had swung his spear, and Jae-ha had nimbly dodged the attack. However Yun had blinked, and in that next fraction of a second all he saw was the tip of the blade stuck in the wall. Right next to Jae-ha's face, at that!

"Spare us the bad jokes that rain down more on the party."⁴

"Really? I thought my passionate speech would get the party *started*, to be honest."⁵

Hak and Jae-ha smiled tensely as they kept each other in check. Thinking there was nothing to do about these two, Yun looked sideways towards Yona. Normally she would've rebuked them, but she was looking very deep in thought.

⁴ Hak goes back to the whole "the temperature drops when you tell cold jokes" malarkey here. His actual line reads "Could you spare us dropping the temperature even lower?"

⁵ Likewise, I adapted Jae-ha's lines. His actual line reads, "Really? I thought my passionate speech would bring the temperature *up*, to be honest".

“...So in other words, Jae-ha’s proposal would be something like a suggestion box.”

Her serious tone caught Yun by surprise. Her light smile had faded away, and in her eyes now dwelled an intense fire.

“I think that when cohabiting with others there’s bound to be some form of discontent. Even if that’s not the case, if anyone has anything troubling them, I’d like to hear them out. And if possible I’d like for us to solve it together.”

The inside of the cave fell into perfect silence at Yona’s statement. Her stare landed on each and every one of them, and Yun unconsciously caught his breath.

“Well, you heard her. What’re you gonna do?”

Jae-ha called out to Hak, likely with some purpose.

“...There’s nothing I *can* do,” sighed Hak as he swung the spear over his shoulder, and walked back towards the wall.

“Of course,” murmured Yun to himself as he watched the scene unfold. All members here present were well aware that once Yona set her mind on something she would not budge whatsoever.

“So who’s going first?” Yun asked as he surveyed his surroundings, to which Jae-ha replied without hesitation.

“I believe it should be either Hak, who looks clouded with worldly desires, or Kija, who’s in the prime of his youth.”

“Look who’s talking, freak. Though I won’t deny what you said about the white snake... what the—?”

Another rally of light squabbling seemed like the norm here, but the moment Hak turned to his side he stiffened. Thinking it strange Yun followed his gaze, and found Kija shedding a waterfall of tears.

“What the—?! What’s wrong with you, Kija?!”

“T-The Princess’s words...were just so moving...”

“Oh Kija, you’re overreacting!” giggled Yona, and the moment he looked at her Kija’s tears swelled up even more. Looking deeply moved he seemed to be saying something, but it was already beyond human comprehension.

Yun cleared his throat and stood up. He surveyed his companions’ faces yet again.

“So, is anybody else up for going first?”

“Worries and doubts, hmm...”

The first one to react was, surprisingly, Zeno. He folded his arms and, as he frowned, seemed to be seriously thinking the matter over, something rather unlike him.

“Oh! Got one!”

Zeno clapped his hands together and looked up resolutely. Wandering what it could possibly be Kija sniffled and paid close attention too.

“About *Seiryū*’s...”

What?! It’s about Shin-ah??

At this yet again unexpected development Yun’s eyes flung wide open in disbelief. For Zeno, the very picture of carefree, to have something bothering him was already shocking enough, but for it to be related to Shin-ah, the most harmless out of their party of seven... Even Shin-ah himself, though wearing his mask, seemed very anxious about it.

Amidst this bizarre atmosphere that wrapped around them, Zeno spoke up wearing an extremely serious face.

“About *Seiryū*’s fluffy fur, why is it so snugly I wonder?”

And in that moment, time undoubtedly stopped.

Yun’s mouth stuttered, and Jae-ha, in a manner fit for his status as the group’s senior in life, began to explain, “My boy, that’s—”. It would seem he was trying to neatly

bring things together, but his voice trembled as if holding back a fit of laughter, "That's not a worry, that's a question."

"My words exactly!!" shouted back Yun with all his might. Behind him he heard Hak murmur in a low voice.

"I see, so that sort of stuff works too..."

Oh no, I'm getting another bad feeling about this...

Despite there being no need for this bad feeling to hit the mark, Yun's intuition was wonderfully spot on. Hak slowly raised his hand halfway and spoke up with a solemn face.

"I find a certain weirdo who sometimes seems to remember he's the oldest here and tries to play out the 'big brother' role really annoying."

"I see. But that's not a worry, it's a complaint."

Invisible sparks flew between Hak and Jae-ha, and Yun sighed for the nth time. It was impossible to hold a counselling session with these members. Whether they were aware of it themselves or not aside, Yun thought to himself they would never manage to get a proper conversation going. But Yona seemed overflowing with eagerness, and together with Ao she turned to Shin-ah.

"What about you, Shin-ah? Do you have any worries or troubles?"

Shin-ah tilted his head, and Kija, who had at some point recovered, encouraged him on.

"The Princess has been so kid as to ask you. You should speak up your thoughts without holding back."

"...Worries..."

It was extremely faint, but Shin-ah indeed spoke up, something very rare of him to do. Kija nodded endlessly, his eyes narrowing as he smiled.

"Go ahead," said Yona, and patiently waited for his continuation.

“Ao has...”

“Pukyu?” answered Ao from Yona’s shoulder, seemingly understanding that her name had been called.

“Ao has... gotten a bit fat, I think...”

“Oh my, that *is* quite a problem.”

At last a slightly decent—no, a *perfectly valid* consultation that Yun could agree with.

“...You’re right. Gaining weight suddenly can place a burden on your body.”

Yona’s expression clouded over as she gently petted Ao with her fingertips.

“We better watch out too. She looks so cute with her cheeks stuffed whilst she eats that I end up feeding her more...”

“...And she’s even eating your hair as we speak!!”

You just couldn’t let your guard down around this squirrel! Yun picked her up from Yona’s shoulder and scolded her.

“From disciplining rare beasts⁶ to squirrels...I really can’t keep up with this!”

“Is that what’s troubling you?”

Yona peered at Yun, and at this he held his breath.

She’s too close! Too defenceless!!

He had a mountain of complaints, but decided to keep them to himself.

“Well if I *must* say something,” he began, selecting a somewhat roundabout way to say it, “...lately the fact that you’re forgetting I’m a pretty *boy* is quite troubling.”

“But I *haven’t* forgotten.”

“No, you definitely have.”

⁶ 珍獸 (*chinjuu*), “a strange beast”. I considered translating this as “legendary creatures”, but decided to go with this translation Titania scans came up with because everybody would be more familiar with it.

The meaning carried in Yun's prompt answer seemed to have gone right over Yona's head. He let out a deep sigh full of lament, and in his place Jae-ha, expert in matters of the heart, spoke up.

"He means to say that even beautiful beings have a gender."

Indeed, it seemed as though the sex-obsessed⁷ Dragon had correctly interpreted his statement.

Thinking he had to change the subject before it turned into something troublesome, Yun turned to Kija. With many *hmms* he collected his thoughts, looking unnaturally serious. There was no need for Yun to point out to him he had yet to reveal his own troubles, for it seemed as though he had realised this himself, and looked as if he felt it necessary for him to say something.

But if I just let him be this might derail into something messy...

The endless humming drove Yun to wits end. This is where he should lend a helping hand.

"Kija, you open up your worries to us all the time, so isn't it that you've run out of things to say?"

"What?" gasped Yona upon hearing Yun's words, "Really? When?"

"Yeah, you've heard them too, Yona! Like how he's afraid of bugs and whatnot."

Yun had simply raised an example in order to strengthen the persuasiveness in his statement, but to Kija it

⁷The word being used here is 色ボケ (*iroboke*), used to refer to someone who's obsessed with sex. I had initially translated it as "dirty-minded", thinking "sex-obsessed" was a bit too explicit, but just the other day I watched an anime that used this translation and decided to change it.

was a rather alarming allegation. He screamed soundlessly and objected furiously, “I-I-I am *not* afraid of bugs!”

Hak smiled deviously as he watched Kija put up a brave front.

“Lord *Hakuryū*, there’s a centipede at your feet.”

“*Gya—?!* S-Stay away from me, don’t come any closer!!”

Yona, who was standing beside the now panicking Kija, calmly inspected the ground. She then looked up, and with puffed up cheeks just as those of Ao’s glared at Hak.

“There’s no centipede here, Hak!”

“So sorry. I must’ve mistaken something else for one.”

He had apologized, but that never-changing nasty and mischievous smile of his still remained on his face. There was no question about it: he had just wanted to mock Kija.

“Okay okay, time to put an end to your stupid yelling. Voices echo in the cave.”

“Oh, Princess! I thought of something!”

“I just told you to *stop yelling!*!”

Kija had shouted out energetically with his usual perfect timing, but at Yun’s roar his whole body shrunk.

“M-My deepest apologies. It wasn’t on purpose.”

“Of course it wasn’t. If it *had* been I would’ve tied you up and thrown you outside.”

“What? That’s not fair! I never knew there was such a bonus!”

Jae-ha’s comment betrayed no expectations, and Yun answered to it offhandedly.

“Sit down, pervert.”

This is no different from our usual fooling around, cursed Yun within his heart as he felt his consciousness slip further away.

Jac-ha had put up a signboard for his counselling room, but it was obvious he had no intention of running the store, and to top it all off the only one taking care of its customers was Yun. Whether this succeeded or not was all up to him now.

“...Though bringing a closure to it as it is and leaving it in disarray is an option too...”

“Did you say something, Yun?” asked Yona with a look of concern, and when he took her into consideration he hesitated. He encouraged himself on and managed to force out an answer, ready to take on whatever was to come.

“It was nothing, Yona. More importantly, we should hear out Kija’s worry.”

With the conversation directed his way, Kija suddenly crouched down and began drawing an endless eight on the ground.

“...Is it something hard to say?”

Kija silently nodded in answer to Yun’s question.

“I see...If you don’t want us to hear it, how about you quietly just tell Yona?”

“...No, I’d like for you to hear this too, Yun.”

Yun almost rose to his feet at this sudden calling. If he specifically wanted Yun instead of Yona to hear this surely it had something to do with an injury or an illness. It seemed as though the others had also arrived at this conclusion, and sharply focused their attention.

“The truth is, well...it just really *hurts*.”

“Where? And in what way?”

“It’s my chest, it hurts as if it’s being gripped. Is this some sort of disease?”

“I can’t tell from just that, it’s not enough information. When exactly does it hurt?”

Yun avoided saying anything reassuring, or that could possibly agitate Kija any further. Instead he calmed his distraughtly loud heartbeats and warily asked him this question.

Kija thought about it for a moment, and then answered with a mystified expression on his face.

“It’s when I gaze upon the Princess’s smile.”

“...Say again?”

“When I gaze upon the Princess’s smile, it fills me with immense happiness too. Yet every so often I feel a great pain in my chest.”

Yun lost all distress in a moment, and in a tone that couldn’t be any more unconcerned he answered, “Ah, *that* sort of incurable disease.”

“Wha—!? An incurable...disease...? You mean I will no longer be able to serve the Princess?”

He’d just been pronounced ill, and *that* was the first thing that worried him? Yun couldn’t help but stare at Kija with a mixture of unimpressed disbelief and honest admiration.

At this Yona softly took hold of Kija’s hand and smiled at him soothingly.

“Don’t worry, Kija. I’m sure Yun will be able to help you.”

“P-Princess! Your words alone are more than... more than...ungh—!”

Just as he said that Kija grasped his chest in agony and crumbled to the ground.

“Kija?! What should we do, Yun...?!”

Tightly holding Kija’s hand, Yona turned with trembling eyes towards Yun.

“Yona, it’s best you stopped that. Kija looks about to ready to ascend to Heaven.”

“It’s *that* bad?! Oh, but...he looks sort of happy.”

Yun peered over Yona’s shoulder, and saw Kija peacefully lying out cold with the most satisfied expression on the face of the earth.

“This has got to be the ‘I have no regrets in life!’ face.”

“Maybe *Hakuryū* is dreaming about food!”

“Good grief, what a troublemaker...”

As Jae-ha commented to Zeno, and Hak too spoke up his own observation, an unexpected shadow was cast over Yun. It was Shina-ah, who silent as always was carrying a blanket he had taken out of their belongings.

“You’re so kind, Shin-ah,” said Yona with a smile as she helped him place the blanket over Kija.

The scene had somehow turned into something rather heart-warming, and Yun exhaled the breath he was holding in. He glanced outside and realised it looked sunnier than moments ago. The rain falling into the puddles had thinned, too. At this rate they would be able to leave the cave soon.

“By the way, we haven’t heard *your* worries yet, Jae-ha.”

“Huh? *My* worries?”

Jae-ha’s voice wavered at Yona’s calling. Surely he had not expected the bottle to spin his way when he had volunteered himself to be the one doing the counselling.

“Is there anything you’d like to share? Anything goes!”

“...Really? *Anything*?”

“Of course!”

Yona beat her chest in a reassuring gesture. Just then Jae-ha took hold of her hand and pulled her into his own chest, embracing her.

“Jae-ha...? What’s wrong?”

“Actually, I might be very ill too.”



Oh, I know what comes next. I know exactly where this is going.

Yun, clever as always, was quick to guess what would happen next. He distanced himself from the pair and stood ready in preparation for the Thunder Beast's attack.

"That's terrible! You must have Yun—"

—take a look at you right now, was surely what she'd intended to say next. But Jae-ha pressed his finger against her lips and stopped her mid-sentence.

"That won't be necessary."

Jae-ha shook his head dramatically. Yona blinked in perplexity as he lowered his face closer to hers.

"Because, Yona dear⁸...you are the only one in this world who can cure me."

Swoosh!

A wind stained with bloodthirst swayed Yun's hair, who had been sitting some distance away. He nervously looked sideways, and found Hak pinpointing Jae-ha's nape with the blade of the spear he was clutching.

"...Wasn't your reaction a bit slow?"

"I thought it best to stop you red-handed."

Jae-ha's question was full of provocation, and Hak's answer, accompanied with a smile, was as sharp as his shining blade. At this tense atmosphere that allowed no one to cut in, all Yun could do was hold his trembling body in a tight embrace with both arms.

"Now now, can't you see the missy⁹ and the others are quite startled?"

⁸ Jae-ha technically calls Yona "Yona-chan", but I'm quite fond of how Titania scans translated his peculiar way of referring to her, and decided to borrow it.

Zeno's brief comment was easy-going as always, but it was enough to unwrap the stiff tension around them.

Yona was quite taken aback, and gradually stepped away from Jae-ha. She alternatively looked at both of them with clear eyes, and after a while finally spoke up.

“I can heal Kija’s and Jae-ha’s illness?”

“Princess, take no notice of what he said. It’s just a load of nonsense.”

“That’s what he says, but actually he’s got it too,” chuckled Jae-ha, but Yona’s expression became even graver.

“Is it contagious...?”

“As if I’d let that happen! These idiots are just a bunch of satyromaniacs¹⁰!” shouted Hak as he sunk his spear into the ground, very clearly not wanting to be lumped with them.

But it seemed as though he wasn’t getting through to Yona, and she continued, in her ever disorientated voice, “Satyromania...? What sort of disease is that?”

⁹ 娘さん (*musume san*). Zeno’s usual way of referring to Yona. It technically means “daughter”, but in this context translates as “lass” or “missy”.

¹⁰ The word being used here is the same 色ボケ (*iroboke*) from a few pages ago. Seeing as Hak is using it here as a disease I decided to translate it using a slightly more sophisticated term. I considered “Hypersexual Disorder” at first, but that’s a rather modern term and it would be no different from using “sex-obsessed”: the answer to what sort of disorder that might be is within the name. The joke here is that Yona has no clue what Hak is talking about, and that “色ボケ” isn’t really a disease. Thus I went for Satyromania/Satyriasis, a rather old word that refers to the condition a man suffers when he’s obsessed with women/sex, that’s not really a disease in itself. “Don Juanism” is a valid synonym for it.

"It means the inside of their heads is nothing but flowers."

"Hey wait a minute! Don't lie to her with such a straight face!"

"Shut up, you idiot with an all-year-round festival for a brain!"

Hak and Jae-ha began to quarrel, no longer minding Yona. For some strange reason Jae-ha, who normally acted maturely, would not budge a single step.

Yun slapped his numb legs awake as he stood up and patted Yona on the shoulder.

"In other words, they're all just a bunch of idiots. The rain has stopped, so we should get going."

"Oh, yes..."

Yona stood up with a quizzical look on her face.

"What should we do with *Hakuryū*? Should Zeno carry him?"

"You'd just drag him along, Zeno. If he still doesn't wake up after you shake him around a bit, could you take care of him, Shin-ah?"

"Pukyu—!" answered Ao, and Shin-ah nodded vigorously.

All that was left to sort out was Hak and Jae-ha, though they would likely just end up following them if they left them behind.

Just as Yun turned around wondering what to do, he saw Yona approaching the two of them.

"Do you have any other worries, Jae-ha?"

"Hm? Would you like me to have more than one?" jested Jae-ha.

"No," answered Yona quietly, "if it was just my misunderstanding, then I apologise for being so persistent. I

thought you might've opened the counselling room because you had something weighing on your mind."

Jae-ha's shoulders shook as if she had hit the nail on the head. They stared at each other but for a few seconds, and the pair of eyes that first looked away were of a green colour.

"...Yes. Thanks to a certain bunch, I've laughed so hard my stomach aches. That's about it, I guess," said Jae-ha, and he smiled at Yona.

It was a flawless smile that offered no space for argument.

*

As they left the cave a refreshing breeze caressed their cheeks. Walking in the lead, Kija, who had safely managed to regain consciousness, was already getting teased by Hak. As he watched over them Yun spoke up to Jae-ha, who walked beside him.

"...What you really wanted was to hear Yona's worries out, right?"

"I just proposed the first thing that came to mind. Besides, do you really think Yona would just obediently tell us?"

His answer was unhesitant, as if he had prepared it beforehand. There was something in it that stopped Yun from agreeing right away, but he couldn't quite place his finger on what it was.

"Hmm," was all he could manage in response, and then fell into silence.

After a while Jae-ha spoke up again.

"They're very interesting, as always."

They were words meant at no one in particular; thoughts spoken aloud. Though of course, Jae-ha must have known that Yun, who was right beside him, would hear them. Still, Jae-ha had spoken, so Yun broke his silence.

“Things are fine as they are for now...”

Yun would face the truth of his own statement that very night.





**under the
same moon**

I

"It's the first time I see food like this."¹

A nostalgic voice reached Su-Won's ears as he wondered aimlessly around the castle's town. A pleasant, soft voice.

He turned around half subconsciously. However the one behind him was not the girl from his memories. She was about five or six years old, and the straight hair that flowed above her shoulders was a beautiful jet black. She held hands with a boy that appeared to be her older brother, and was standing before a shop looking at the goods with shinning eyes.

Of course it's not her. There's no way she'd be here.

It was out of the question. On no account would she visit this place, the King's city. If she did, then...

"Big brother, where are dad and the others?"

A bell-like voice cut off his thoughts. It was the girl from moments before. She had stopped ogling at the deep-fried dumplings and was now looking at her brother with worry.

"Hm? Hmm... I guess they're around here somewhere."

The moment he spoke the boy's face clouded with distress. Who knows how far the young girl had guessed, but she had undoubtedly felt uneasy upon seeing her brother's reaction. From her voice as she spoke next one could tell she was about to cry.

"...Are we lost?"

"It-It's okay! It's precisely for times like these that we chose a meeting spot, right?"

¹ *Akatsuki no Yona* manga chapter 60.

Su-Won, who had heard their conversation, nodded to himself. Judging by the boy's tone of voice it was doubtful they had actually chosen a meeting spot. Yet when the younger sister heard his temporary measure of a lie meant to make her feel safe, she calmed down.

The problem was they didn't know their current location.

Well then, what should we do about this?

Su-Won fixed the hood over his head and discretely surveyed his surroundings, listening carefully. It was early in the morning, and the number of people out on the street was still low. If the heavy footsteps of well-trained military men had been mixed within the crowd, he would have been able to distinguish them immediately. Fortunately, there was no sign of them yet.

But I guess it's only a matter of time before they find me.

After all, the one on his trail was no other than General Ju-Do. As one of the five generals placed in power by the Sky Tribe he was not only a skilled warrior, but had a mind like a steel trap. On top of that he also took his work very seriously.

The frown on his face right now must be quite a sight.

God knows how many times he'd had General Ju-Do join him in a game of "hide and seek". And still General Ju-Do, turning no blind eye, always came seeking after him. He could at least let him wander around town for a short while, seeing as he was perfectly aware of Su-Won's skill with the sword.

Now that I think about it, that time we also went past a store that sold deep-fried dumplings...

It had happened when General Ju-Do was the Commanding Officer of the Imperial Guard's First Squad,

and Su-Won was but nine years old. Though back then they had ran into some trouble and had to stop hiding midway, and Su-Won had not been alone. “He” and “she” who were no longer there had stood beside him, smiling.

*

That day, Su-Won, together with Hak, had managed to sneak Yona out into the town below the castle. They had done it because she had said she had only ever gazed at the town from the castle’s windows, and due to the meeting between the five tribes taking place the town was especially lively.

“Hey, Hak. What’s that?”

Drawn in by the appetizing smell, Yona pointed her finger at something as she rode on Hak’s shoulders. There, in a saucepan filled with oil, floated many small dumplings. They were, precisely, deep-fried dumplings.

“Would you like to try them?” asked Su-Won, realising Yona was immensely curious.

“...I shouldn’t eat this stuff. The poison tester isn’t even here. Father will get angry,” she answered immediately with determination, but her words trailed off into a murmur, eyes still set on the saucepan.

“Then I’ll taste it for poison!” said Hak in a flash.

He could not have possibly seen Yona’s expression, who sat above his head, yet just by hearing her voice he had understood what she wanted.

“It’s because in *Fūga*² we have a lot of small kids.”

Hak’s words came rushing back into his mind.

²風牙 (fuuga), capital of the Wind Tribe’s territory.

Both when he placed the small Yona on his shoulders so that she could see the shops between the rows of people, and when he so naturally offered Su-Won his hand when he was about to be swept away by the crowd, Hak had seemed to him like a true older brother.

Was it because of the different environments in which they had been raised in, or just a difference in their natural traits? Who knew, but from that day on Su-Won saw Hak as someone overwhelmingly tolerant and magnanimous³, and couldn't think of him as someone his own age.

He still remembered the conversation they had that night in a remote corner of the castle after they cleaned up the mess they had got themselves into.

Word by word, very clearly.

“Everything about you, Hak, is my goal.”⁴

The words he said to him were not just empty flattery; they were nothing but the truth. And they still were, even now. Even though he had grown, become stronger and polished his fighting skills, he still felt as though he was not getting any closer to him.

... No. Perhaps, in truth...

As if dragging him back to reality, the crying voice of the girl reached his ears.

³ 包容力 (*houyouryoku*). This word has no exact translation, but it's worth pointing out its true meaning. The dictionaries' translate it as "magnanimous", "tolerant", "caring" or "broad-minded", but this word carries a motherly feeling to it: whomever it's being applied to has motherly qualities – they are caring and protective.

⁴ *Akatsuki no Yona* manga chapter 61.

The elder brother, at loss for what to do, stood stock still in front of his younger sister who had finally broken into tears.

“...Time to do something.”

Su-Won lowered his voice and smiled at the storekeeper, who was looking at the children with worry. The storekeeper nodded silently, scooped some dumplings out of the saucepan, and stabbed them on a skewer. “Give ‘em this.”

Su-Won smiled widely, and gratefully took the dumpling skewers. “Thank you very much. Surely they’re so delicious they’ll dry her tears.”

“Not ‘surely’; they most certainly will!” said the storekeeper with a confident smile, and turned around.

Not meeting his gaze, he said to the puzzled Su-Won, “No need to pay me, just go give it to ‘em already.”

“...Yes”

Su-Won bowed at the man and, holding the deep-fried dumpling skewers in his hands, crouched before the two children. The young brother and sister stared in wonder at the cloaked man that suddenly appeared before them. Once he had made sure their eyes were on him, Su-Won held up the skewers.

“Here, they’re very tasty!”

“Huh? But...”

Well taught by their parents they must have been, for the both of them did not reach out their hands so easily. The boy stared at him in bewilderment, and the girl quickly hid behind her brother’s back.

“This store’s dumplings are very special, they’re filled with sweet potato paste,” Su-Won explained, wanting them to relax and drop their guard without explicitly telling them to do so.

"That's right!" said the storekeeper, and Su-Won turned to find him nodding full of pride.

"...Sweet potatoes..." murmured the girl quietly. It seemed Su-Won had struck the right cord, and she suddenly poked her head out from behind her brother. Then came a very deep, reverberating sound.

Grrrrumble grumble.

So went their instrumental duet, and the both of them pressed their stomachs down with their hands.

"I guess they smell so nice your stomachs are growling. Here, have them before they get cold."

Urged by his words the young boy and girl took the skewers with their little hands. Smiles returned to their faces as they muttered how delicious and incredible they tasted.

Su-Won stood up and gently stroked their heads.

"Once you've finished eating we should search for your fa—"

"There will be no need for that."

A low voice interrupted him from behind. Su-Won knew who it belonged to without having to turn around and check: it was General Ju-Do.

"How many times must I tell you not to wander off alone before you actually listen to me? Is your head full of hay, your Majesty⁵?"

He was holding back his voice, seeing as they were in the middle of town, but it had more than sufficient intensity to it. The poor siblings, who heard it from up close, trembled with fear.

⁵ General Ju-Do uses very respectful speech when speaking to Su-Won, however in English there's no way of showing that because unlike Japanese (or Spanish) we have no such thing. In an attempt to show this I decided to add "your Majesty" where possible.

“—Uguu!”

Seemingly noticing the children's reaction, General Ju-Do was slightly taken aback. Su-Won stifled a wry smile and leaned forwards in order to meet their eyes.

“It's okay. He might have a scary face, but he's actually quite the caretaker.”

“... It's completely involuntary.”

Whether he was referring to his scary face or the fact that he was involuntarily becoming someone's caretaker wasn't entirely clear, but thinking it was probably both Su-Won couldn't stop himself from sputtering a barely contained laugh.

He then felt a sudden death glare pierce his back, but General Ju-Do called out to his soldiers instead.

“I leave the rest in your hands.”

“Yes, sir!”

At this Su-Won finally turned to look at General Ju-Do and his men. They were unarmed and dressed in ordinary garments. Of course, they were all most likely hiding swords on them, but as far as looks go they could easily go by as just a number of slightly scary looking men.

Su-Won looked at every one of General Ju-Do's men in the eye, and smiled cheerfully.

“I'm truly sorry. Could you take care of them for me?”

“Of course, your Majesty ...!”

As he turned back to the children with the intention of entrusting them to the soldiers, for some reason the little girl's eyes were moist.

“What about you, Mr. Dumplings⁶? Are you not coming with us?”

“Erm, well...”

⁶ The little girl actually refers to Su-Won as お団子のお兄ちゃん (odango no onii-chan), “Big Brother with the dumplings”.

Answering in Su-Won's stead, who was at loss of words, the boy pulled his sister's hand.

"Come on! Can't you see he can't?"

"But, but..."

"Someone's here to pick him up, so he can't come with us," said the boy wanting to soothe his sister, though he was looking somewhat teary-eyed too.

"...You sure are popular," muttered General Ju-Do with an impressed yet suspicious look on his face. Su-Won returned a vague smile and patted the siblings on their heads.

"Sorry I can't go with you. These men here will surely find your father, so could you please trust them and follow them for me?"

The boy and girl blinked a few times, and then nodded.

"Will we meet again?"

"...Yes, I'm sure we will."

"It's a promise, okay? Hold on to this until then."

As she said so, the little girl pulled out a small purse made of jute from her breast pocket. She placed it on Su-Won's hand and then ran off pulling her brother along.

"Wow! Don't dash off so suddenly!" shouted the boy, followed by the footsteps of confused soldiers. As he was dragged off, the boy turned and looked back towards Su-Won. He bowed his head lightly, and, just like that, did not turn around a second time.

*

Once their little backs were out of sight, General Ju-Do slowly spoke up.

"For caution's sake, I'd like to check the con—"

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Now then, shall we get going?”

“...For caution’s sake, I’d like to check the conte—”

“I’m sorry, did I interrupt you?”

“...To hell with you!”

Had his men still been there, their faces would surely have turned pale. But all Su-Won did was smile, and General Ju-Do did not take back his words, either. He changed the subject, as if the previous exchanged hadn’t happened.

“Did you gain anything from wandering around town?” asked General Ju-Do in a faint voice that could be lost within the sound of footsteps as they headed back towards the castle.

Likewise, Su-Won answered with a question of his own.

“You’re not going to let me off this one, I suppose?”

“...There’s no need to answer, if you wish not to.”

“Huh? Oh no, that’s not it. It’s just, how should I put it? I seem to still lack determination⁷...”

Su-Won smiled bitterly and looked up at the sky. Just as General Ju-Do followed his lead and did so too, the sun broke through the clouds.

“The sun is always dazzling, regardless of where you.”

Who knows whether this whisper reached General Ju-Do’s ears or not.

Su-Won stretched his hand upwards and squinted at the sunlight seeping through the clouds.

⁷ The Word being used here is 暫昧 (*aimai*) (written here in hiragana, not in kanji) meaning literally “vague”, “ambiguous”, “unclear”, and as if trying to prove it’s usage it’s being used very vaguely. Su-Won literally says “I’m still vague/unclear,” most likely in reference to the fact that he’s still thinking dearly of Yona and Hak, thus the translation I decided to go for.

2

Oh, they have children with them...

Upon hearing the sound of cheerful distant voices, Yun immediately relaxed. The cries of children, mixed with those of the rest of the members of the tribe, were incredibly nostalgic to him.

“You sure you’ve got everything?”

“Yep, all set.”

Yun turned to Hak and nodded at him as he checked the contents of his bag one last time.

The villages they had come across so far had been very small, thus they hadn’t been expecting much. They had been hoping to, if lucky, buy the bare necessities, when suddenly they had miraculously come across tribe of peddlers¹, and thus managed to get their hands on almost everything they wanted.

They said they’d be wandering around this area for a little longer. I wonder if we’ll bump into them again...

Yun had felt an incredible sense of relief when he heard about them. In towns built around castles and in provincial cities one could expect to find certain things, but in these villages dotted around the mountains it was quite hard to get your hands on any resources. Thus these tribes that stopped by regularly were truly their lifelines.

“Well then, should we get going?”

¹ This whole segment up until now is very hard to translate. The word being used here is 商団, which I am guessing is read as *shoudan*. The reason why I’m “guessing” is because this isn’t actually a word. It’s written with the kanjis for *merchant* and *group/tribe*, so you can guess the meaning by that. I’m guessing it could be a synonym for 行商, *gyoushou*, which translates as monger/peddler, and Yun’s words later on suggest they are nomadic, so this is the translation I went for.

"Yeah. If we don't I get the feeling Kija's gonna come and get us..."

Yun said this half jokingly, but Hak froze as he lifted the bags over his shoulder.

"...I can see that happening."

"If it weren't because Yona has a bit of a cold he would've definitely come with us," said Yun very seriously, and Hak agreed wholeheartedly with a nod.

Kija was honestly kind and curious, so he often offered himself to be the one to help out with the shopping. He had been about to raise his hand *tout de suite* and offer himself up for the task, but at the same time had looked at Yona, who was having a coughing fit, and right there on the spot stated he would stay behind.

If this were a busy town they could easily camouflage themselves...

Aside from Kija's bandaged hand, Yona's red hair and Shin-ah's mask stood out like sore thumbs too. They had tried to hide these elements by cloaking themselves, but the fact that everyone's attention landed on them had not changed. Because of this it was usually Hak and Yun who took care of the shopping.

"Bringing Jae-ha with you last time sure scared you for life, huh?" said Hak as he fixed the bags over his shoulder. The only thing left for Yun to carry was a small bag of spices. He was well aware that he had to be careful with them, but at Hak's words he couldn't stop himself from sinking his nails into it.

"Ungh! Don't remind me of that, it was so annoying!"

The dragon blood flowing through Jae-ha gifted his leg with wondrous strength. With a single kick against the ground he could lift himself up into the air and fly far away, soaring the skies much like a bird. He would make use of

tree branches and rooftops, and reach his destination in the blink of an eye.

"He'd be quite useful if only he sealed his mouth," said Hak as he smirked, and Yun glared up at him.

"As a means of transport, yeah. But do you really think *Jae-ha* is capable of shutting up? The other day the moment I took my eyes off him he started gathering endless unwanted attention!"

The event in question – that pained Yun's head just to think about – had only happened the other day. A shower seemed right upon them, and in order to get the shopping over with promptly Yun had asked *Jae-ha* for help. Fortunately he had very willingly accepted, but in the short time it had taken Yun to buy what he needed *Jae-ha* had been surrounded by every woman passing through town. And it hadn't been just one or two: it had been quite a crowd. Because of this he had gathered even more attention to himself, and it had become quite hard to get close to him.

Chaos! A complete disaster! Yun screamed in his mind to his heart's content, readied himself, and threw his body into the swarm of people. By the time he managed to somehow successfully drag *Jae-ha* out of it he was at the peak of exhaustion. He calmed down his breaths and looked up a *Jae-ha*, who had a carefree smile on his face.

"Think before you act, will you? You're not a kid anymore!"

"I'm sorry Yun. I just can't help it."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

"I can't help but smile when I lock eyes with a woman. I just can't ignore them when they've gone out of their way to speak to me... You get it, right? There's just nothing I can do about it."

“Aaalright then! I see someone’s asking for a good beating!”

Such had been the unfortunate events.

Though exhausted they managed to make it back, but it seemed as though Kija had become incredibly jealous of Jae-ha, who had been trusted with the job, so much so that he began to prove himself worthy in various ways even more than usual.

“Good grief, misfortunes never come alone do they?”

“.....”

Huh? Why’s he not answering?

Yun, expecting Hak to immediately agree with him, was rather taken aback by his lack of reaction. He peeked up at him as they walked side by side, and saw him staring at something through squinted eyes.

“Thunder Beast? What’s wrong?”

“I can hear something...”

“What?! Are they closing in on us?”

Had their pursuers from Hiryū Castle found them?

Hak shook his head weakly at Yun, who had steeled himself.

“No, it’s not coming our way.”

“Then...”

...what could it possibly be? Yun was desperate to ask, but Hak had sealed his lips and strained his ears. Keen to not disturb him he held back his question.

I’m listening, but all I hear are children’s... voices?

Just then a dry wind carried towards him the fragmented sound of a young girl’s cries.

“That just now, where did it...?”



“That way,” answered Hak faster than Yun could think, breaking into a run in the village’s opposite direction. Not thinking about it twice Yun followed after him.

If it’s coming from outside the village... could it be a lost kid?

It wasn’t rare for children, absorbed in their games, to wander off and end up in unfamiliar places. Not to mention they were in the middle of the mountains. The same landscape stretched out endlessly - it was easy to lose one’s way.

“I’m fine, so just get going already!”

“No, I don’t want to...!”

The cries had finally become clear. They seemed to belong to a young boy and a young girl. Hak looked backwards for a second. Yun nodded at him, and Hak increased his speed, disappearing in the direction the voices had come from. He said nothing as he left him behind; clearly this meant Yun need only keep running straight ahead. Surely enough, as he charged right ahead Hak came back into view.

Oh, just a girl?

He was sure he had heard a young boy’s voice too, but there was no one of the sort around. Just a girl facing Hak, standing still as can be. Yun, arriving late at the scene, questioned Hak with a look, but he answered with a silent shrug. Yun calmed his breaths down and observed the young girl’s figure from behind. He had gathered by her voice that she was young, but the tip of her head barely reached Hak’s waist. He heard a quiet sniffle, and at the same time the ponytails that divided her chestnut hair in two shook.

She must be really stubborn if even Hak hasn’t managed to win her over.

In the city he was born, the city of Fūga, Hak grew up surrounded by his many younger “brothers” and “sisters”, and no matter where they went children would always mysteriously be very fond of him. Though of unfriendly looks and high stature – to top it off often rude – it would seem they understood he was in fact an honest man.

And when he's with Yona he pretty much becomes a human magnet.

However Yona wasn't here, and Hak wasn't making his way into this girl's heart. Yun had no choice but to step in. As to not frighten her, Yun carefully and slowly approached her.

“Are you in pain? Are you hurt anywhere?”

She had most definitely heard him, yet she returned no answer. He patiently waited, and eventually the girl timidly looked up. Relieved to receive some manner of response Yun bent his keens to meet her gaze.

“It... doesn't look like you're hurt. Are you alone?”

“...Jin told me not to tell anybody...”

Her voice was feeble, but at least she was now willing to talk. Yun breathed a sigh of relief and Hak relaxed his tense shoulders, the air around them loosening.

I'm guessing Jin must be the boy I heard before.

“I'm fine, so just get going already!”

Judging by his tone of voice he must have warned her not to say a word. The problem was to whom, and what it was he was trying to hide.

“Well, my name's Yu—...”

Thinking that before asking for her name he should first introduce himself Yun opened his mouth, but suddenly choked. Was it really a good idea to use his real name?

Would not doing so bring her trouble? Questions he had not once before thought about ran around his head.

Though unlike Yona and Hak it's not like they know my name...

There was plenty of possibility that they could be tracked down by the most unexpected, trivial of things. They could never be too careful, especially now that they had managed to gather the Four Dragons.

... You know, it's like I'm stuck in the middle of an unknown, enormous whirlpool.

In all honesty, he had been half in doubt when he heard Ik-Soo's prophecy. The idea of this princess – brought up with great care within the comfort and safety of the castle, unknowing of the world outside it – gathering the legendary Four Dragons, taking with her but a single companion, was utterly unconceivable.

However Yona did, in fact, manage to accomplish this. That alone was already hard to believe, but she had also freed the town of Awa from Yan Kumji's governance, and was changing peoples' lives greatly.

Looking back at it now, that was the decisive blow.

Now that they had gathered the Four Dragons they had guaranteed themselves a minimum safety. However on the other hand Yun could not help but feel that they had steered themselves towards an even more dangerous path.

Well, not that anybody really cares about that...

If they really wanted to run away from their pursuers they should rigorously avoid all contact with their surroundings. But Yona, whose life they were after, could not stop herself from holding out her hand to those in need, and in the future would never turn a blind eye to them.

And Yun, who had decided to travel with her, wouldn't either.

“My name’s Yun. What’s yours?”

Yun took in a small breath, and as he smiled asked the little girl this question. In doing so her young eyes, moist with tears, blinked a few times. She answered with a feeble voice:

“...Yuno.”

“So you’re Yuno? Nice to meet you! By the way, this Jin, what did—”

Yun wanted to ask her what she had been told not to say a word about, and who she wasn’t allowed to tell, but before he could Yuno suddenly spoke up.

“Big brother, you’re not an adult, right?”

“Huh?”

“Jin told me if the adults found out they’d get mad, so I’m not allowed to tell them.”

I see, so that’s what’s going on...

Yun grasped the situation and looked over at Hak, who was silently watching over the course of events. He had most likely understood what was happening after hearing that exchange, and with a wry smile shrugged his shoulders. Yuno had taken one look at Hak and classified him as an adult. Thus, just as Jin had instructed her, she had tightly sealed her mouth.

“I’m a pretty boy, so there’s no problem.”

“A pretty boy...”

“Yup. I’m not an adult, so I won’t get mad at you.”

As Yun piled reassuring statements one after the other, Yuno at last took a breath, looking very relieved. She reached out her hands, which she had been clenching together in front of her chest, and tightly grasped Yun’s sleeve.

“Big brother, you’ve got to help Jin out! He can’t get down from a tree!”

*

The place Yuno guided them to was quite the magnificent sight.

Behind a large rotting tree followed a cliff, and every so often a strong wind would blow upwards. Every time it did the tree would make a disturbing creaking sound, and its branches and leaves would sway.

“Of all the trees in the world, why did he have to go and climb this one?” murmured Yun in slight exasperation, and Yuno, desperate, tried to justify their cause.

“He was trying to save Myaa!”

“What? There’s someone else up there with him?”

“...No, not a ‘someone’. An animal.”

It was Hak who had corrected him, squinting up at the tree. Though not as impressive as that of Shin-ah’s, through whose veins ran dragon blood, Hak’s sight was terrifyingly sharp. If he said so, then there was no doubt about it.

As per expectation Yuno nodded, surprised.

“Y-Yes...Myaa’s still just a kitten, and she climbed up the tree but couldn’t come back down, so Jin went up to help her but...”

Her voice would not come out beyond that point, and she looked down as she cried. Yun embraced her little shaking shoulders, and without a word gently stroked her head.

Jin probably just wanted to show off in front of Yuno...I understand where he’s coming from, but to make her cry on top of making her worry? Come on!

Yun wanted to cheer for this boy he had not yet even seen, but this was a different matter entirely. He looked up

with determination and asked Hak, who had dropped his bags on the ground and was warming up:

“So, can you climb it?”

“Piece of cake,” answered Hak with a dependable smile that matched his words.

Relieved, Yuno let out a small sigh within Yun’s arms.

“The tree looks pretty weakened, so be careful.”

“*You* be careful, you don’t want anything falling on you” Hak replied promptly, and not waiting for Yun’s answer kicked against the ground with great force.

Creak, crack!

The unpleasant sounds followed immediately, but thankfully no branches snapped or fell down, and before long Hak had disappeared into the foliage.

“...Will Jin and Myaa be okay?”

“Of course! He might not look like it, but Hak’s actually quite agile and strong!”

“Really...?” Yuno murmured with a pallid face, but at Yun’s words her expression softened slightly.

However a second later they heard a cry from above.

“What the—?! Who the hell are you!?”

“This girl called Yuno sent me...hey, wait! Don’t flail around, idiot!”

The moment she heard those voices Yuno’s eyes began to glow.

“Jin!”

“Thank goodness, looks like he’s found him. All that’s left now...”

...is for them to come down, but all Yun could hear was restless battering. Hak could jump down without a problem if he were on his own, but seeing as he had a kid and a cat with him it wasn’t that simple. It was possible for them to lose their lives if he messed up his landing.

Please, just stay still, prayed Yun as he looked up at the large tree, when suddenly the branches began to shake furiously.

Wha—! You're joking! They're not even down yet!

He unconsciously tightened his arms around Yuno, and in that very moment...

“GYAAAAAAA!”

“MEOOOOOOW!”

Accompanied by the sound of branches snapping resounded the screams of a boy and a cat.

Crap, is the whole tree coming down!?

In a hurry Yun picked Yuno up into his arms and ran away from the tree. However no ground shaking impact ever came, nor did any manner of sound resembling that of a tree trunk falling. He turned around nervously, and locked eyes with Hak, who had landed perfectly.

“Hey.”

“...W-Welcome back,” answered Yun as always, matching Hak’s casual demeanour. The other two and their little pet were however too shocked to even speak. Especially Jin, who carried by Hak under his armpit, was trembling vigorously along with the kitten he held in his arms.

Pretty brave of him not to cry, though. Guess this is what you call a man’s pride.

Thinking it all very sweet Yun peered at Yuno, whose face was still stiff.

“Aren’t you glad, Yuno? Look, Jin and Myaa are safe and sound!”

Yun pointed his finger as he spoke, and just then Jin placed his two feet on the ground. With the kitten still in his arms Jin shrugged his shoulders, looking uneasy. But the

one he was facing, Yuno, tightly sealed her lips and glared at him with furrowed eyebrows.

Yun had expected Yuno to return a smile, and was rather shocked at this unforeseen development.

Was she so tense her face is frozen stiff?

He thought to himself that she probably couldn't move her legs either, and decided it was best to pick her up. He reached out his arms towards her, but in that very moment...

“Jin, you idiot! You stupid, stupid idiot...!”

Yuno's voice, stained with tears, echoed around them. Her slender body was trembling all over, and she was bright red all the way down to her neck. Jin was dumbfounded, and stood motionless with a blank look on his face.

I thought Yuno was the one getting dragged along by Jin, but could it be...

Yun glanced at Yuno and found her staring back at him.

“Big brother.”

“Y-Yes!” replied Yun as he straightened his back subconsciously.

Yuno tilted her head at him puzzled, but soon recomposed herself and unfastened a small bag that hung from her waist.

“...Yuno?”

“Here! A token of thanks!” said Yuno, and as she did she opened up the bag. Yun hesitated for a moment, but then gratefully looked inside.

“Are these...”

“They're bean-jam buns². We'll be having a festival soon, so I made them with mum and the other women.”

² 饅頭 (*manju*), a bun with bean-jam filling.

A faint smell drifted upwards from the bag, and Yun smiled lovingly. It was a sweet, sweet scent he rarely had the chance to enjoy.

“Are you kidding? There’s no way *that’s* enough to pay them back!”

Jin, who had remained silent up until now, suddenly cut into the conversation.

“W-Why?” asked Yuno, insecure. Jin answered with a wicked smile:

“Cos’ you’re the one who made them, obviously! I bet they taste so terrible they’re inedible!”

“That’s not true! Mum told me they tasted good!”

“Well, that doesn’t mean it’s true!”

As if taking revenge for the previous outburst, Jin would not stop his verbal attack on Yuno. Eventually Yuno bit her lip and fell into silence.

Is this that? The thing boys do where they bully girls precisely because they like them?

However there was a limit to how far he could take it, and to begin with the reason why Yuno was giving them the buns was because Jin had tried to show off in front of her and done something stupid.

Yun smiled wryly despite himself, and clapped his hands firmly.

“Okay okay, let’s leave it at that.”

“Big brother, I’m not lying, they really *are* good!” said Yuno with moist eyes that looked ready to spill tears, and Yun gently stroked her head.

“Thanks, I look forward to tasting them,” he answered, and took the bag.

Yuno’s expression lit up with enthusiasm.

“...Wow, don’t come back crying if they make you sick.”

“You’re still going on!?”

Whack!

Hak’s fist came down on Jin just as Yun shouted at him. They heard Jin’s slightly delayed wail loud and clear, but both Yun and Hak paid no attention to him.

“You reap what you sow, remember that well.”

“And this was all your fault in the first place, you know?”

The scoldings hit Jin in rapid succession from both of them. He sullenly puffed up his cheeks, and quietly mumbled something to himself.

I wonder what he said...

Yun could not make out what the boy had said, but it appeared as though Hak had. He opened his eyes wide, and unexpectedly his expression softened.

“Let me give you some advice,” he said with a smile. He crouched down and whispered into Jin’s ear.

“What’s all this secret talk? It’s not very polite of youuu,” hooted Yun half jokingly, however neither of them answered back. But then again, Jin had turned bright red and was looking completely incapable of any manner of speech.

*

Yuno and Jin bid them goodbye, and Yun and Hak left the village at long last.

Yun was awfully curious about what had happened to Jin, who had so suddenly become quiet. He looked up at Hak, who was walking beside him.

“What did Jin mumble right at the end?”

“He said he just couldn’t watch Yuno cry and do nothing about it.”



“Wow! Surprisingly a smooth one, isn’t he!”

“Yeah, but he’s not going anywhere with just that.”

He was throwing brickbats at the boy, but Hak’s expression was ever soft, and his gaze was full of warmth. Yun thought to himself that this was undoubtedly what one could call the look of an elder brother.

Though there’s no way I’m telling him that.

“You’re right, he’s not going anywhere with just that,” agreed Yun, and continued with another question, “So what did you tell him?”

“...Well there’s only one possible response to it.”

The corners of his mouth curled upwards, and as if stating the obvious, he said:

“To man-up and get stronger.”

They had been words directed at Jin, but they fell heavily onto Yun’s chest. The only reason they did not sound like a sermon was probably because it felt as though Hak was saying them to himself too.

“...You know, I hadn’t seen bean-jam buns until I started travelling with Yona.”

“Really? Oh, but I guess the same goes for me.”

“What...?”

Yun couldn’t help but stare up in disbelief. However Hak kept his eyes looking forward, and continued in a nonchalant tone.

“Before I became the Princess’s bodyguard I’d only seen them every now and then sold by peddlers.”

Hak was undoubtedly referring to his days in the city of Fūga, but why he would not mention the name of his birthplace, where he’d been General of an entire tribe, was something Yun could not hope to understand. Thus he deliberately answered in a cheerful voice.

“I guess they really must be pretty rare!”

“Well, to begin with ingredients are hard to get a hold of.”

“Oh yeah, that too.”

Yun laughed lightly and stretched both his arms upwards, looking at the sky. The sun had begun to set, causing indigo and orange to melt together – a stunningly beautiful sight.

“The world sure is big...”

Yun’s brief soliloquy received no reply.

A short time later, having enjoyed his fair share of pleasant silence, Yun opened the small bag.

“Haha, their shape sure is unusual, but they still look tasty!” burst Yun into laughter, and Hak joined in with a wicked smile.

“I wonder about that. Sometimes the taste matches the looks!”

“Speaking from experience are you?”

“You got it.”

His reply was short, but it was noticeably full of meaning. Yun swallowed, and with a certain morbid curiosity he asked:

“What did they taste like?”

“...Hard to explain with words.”

“I-I see... I’m surprised those peddlers dared to sell that sort of stuff.”

“Oh no, it wasn’t something I bought.”

“Oh really? Did you get it as a bonus or something?”

Hak shook his head yet again. For him to so unusually pick such a roundabout way of speaking it must have been quite the hard topic for him. An ominous feeling began to settle in Yun as he eliminated the possibilities one by one.

“If you didn’t buy it or get it as a bonus, then...”

“It was something the Princess made and gave to me.”

A shocking confession.

Hak was most likely speaking of a time in which Yona had not yet picked up a knife in her life. Even Yun had been able to tell the moment he met her that her dexterity in the kitchen was noticeably terrible; one could easily guess the cooking skills Yona possessed at the time when she was brought up in Hiryū Castle as a true princess.

“But, I mean, you ate it didn’t you?”

“I was forced to!”

“...Bodyguard’s sure have it tough.”

“I couldn’t possibly allow the Princess’s bean-jam buns to cause any casualties,” said Hak with a gallantly brave expression as he looked up at the sky, now darker than before.

Yun nonchalantly followed his gaze, and saw the moon begin to rise from the east.

So we’re having a full moon tonight...

Was Ik-Soo gazing at it from his mountain hut too?

As he thought about this, Yun widened his stride.

3

He remembered that day as if it were yesterday. It happened not long after Hak was permanently stationed at the castle and appointed as Princess Yona's bodyguard three years ago from now, when he was fifteen...

"The Princess entered the kitchen!"

The news, jolting and distressing to all those who heard it, spread across the castle in the blink of an eye, along with the tragic report that Hak had personally tasted her creation.

*

Hak leaned against the window frame and rested his chin on his hand, stifling a yawn as he looked up at the sky.

I wonder if this is how it feels to be inside a birdcage...

Hiryū Castle was unreasonably spacious, but the sky he saw from its grounds was somewhat "narrow" compared to what he had seen in Fūga, his home.

Though I guess the bird in question isn't bothered by it because she hasn't seen the outside.

Princess Yona had been working diligently on her dancing ever since this morning in a room of the imperial residence. As her bodyguard Hak accompanied her, but in truth there was nothing for him to do there.

What's the point? She sucks at it anyway. But I guess it's funny, so it's not too bad.

He glanced at Princess Yona, and watched her, as always, being lead around by the fan. The dance was supposed to represent the elegance of a swan, but it did not

look the part by any standards. She had somewhat managed the basic steps, but was stiff and had no sense of rhythm.

“...It looks more like a baby chick dance.”

“I can hear you, Hak! Just you wait and see, I’ll get better in no time!”

It would seem as though Hak’s whisper had reached Princess Yona’s ears. Her face, displaying puffed out cheeks in protest, was – much like her dancing – far from being graceful. He thought of pointing this out too whilst at it, but the moment he opened his mouth something came flying his way. At the same time the Princess’s voice resounded in panic:

“Hak, duck!”

Faster than she could finish speaking Hak was already moving. He caught the unidentified flying object with ease, and verified its identity.

“...Princess, fans aren’t things meant to be thrown.”

“W-Well, sorry! It just slipped out of my hand!”

“Indeed. Thank the Heavens it was me who you threw it at.”

“...”

As he walked over to return the fan, Princess Yona looked at him with a complex expression hard to define. If he absolutely had to chose, he would say it was a face of disappointment.

“What’s wrong?”

“...If you’re fine with it, then nothing,” she answered as if implying something else, puzzling Hak even further. This “if you’re fine” had to mean “if you’re uninjured,” but if so then why not express relief instead? It made no sense.

What the hell was that supposed to mean then?

As if escaping from Hak’s questioning gaze, Princess Yona resumed her practice. He couldn’t exactly just stand

by her pointlessly forever, and slowly made his way back to the corner of the room. He leaned on the wall and discretely followed her with his eyes.

Oh, she made the same mistake again.

He couldn't hold back the wry smile that appeared on his lips, and in that instant their eyes met. He was sure a round of complaints was on its way, but Princess Yona's expression was close to being the exact opposite of what he had expected. She looked at him, and smiled as if relieved.

...Seriously, what the hell is going on?

Ever since then something about Princess Yona felt out of place. She would stare at Hak intensely, but when he called out to her her reaction was slow, and if he asked her what was wrong she would turn the question on its head and ask *him* if there was "something he wanted to say". What he found most perplexing was that this attitude was limited to him alone.

I thought I was just overthinking it at first, but seeing as it's been going on for so long...

She would speak as usual to His Majesty, the court ladies, and even the guards she would occasionally walk past in the corridors. The only times she acted strangely were, truthfully and genuinely, when she was speaking to Hak. And today they had even quarrelled over her schedule this afternoon!

When she didn't have etiquette classes or lessons in the arts of dancing and playing music, she was, despite being a princess, fundamentally free. Thus she should have spent her free time as she pleased, as she always did...yet she had called out to Hak.

“Hey Hak, I want to try getting on a horse and going for a long ride, how does that sound?”

“Not ever.”

“Then how about a walk? Like, around the castle walls or something!”

“Go ahead. I shall be following you closely from behind, but pay me no heed.”

“...There’s no point in it then.”

“Are you in need of someone to talk idly to? If that’s the case should I call for Min-Soo to accompa—?”

“Forget it! If this is what it comes down to I’ll just go to the library!”

And with that squabble she finally decided to head over to the library. Hak had no clue as to what was happening, nor what had “come down” to what exactly, but the very fact that Princess Yona would voluntarily burry herself in books was already abnormal enough. Though just worrying about it wasn’t going to take him anywhere.

Don’t tell me Princess Yona has a fever...

It was clear she would flare up if he asked her, but Hak was half serious about it. Despite the difference in their social status, Princes Yona and Hak, as well as Su-Won, had grown up together and were childhood friends. They knew everything about one another, even things that would rather be forgotten. Needless to say, not every detail was so very serious.

For example, Hak knew very well Princess Yona detested classroom learning, and was by no means the sort of person to sit down and calmly read a book. The only exceptions were practicing playing musical instruments and dancing.

But that's 'cos she's quite desperate to catch Su-Won's attention.

After taking his thoughts this far, Hak sighed and grumbled to himself. Princess Yona was behaving unlike herself, and to top it off was trying too hard to do so. There could only be one reason for it: this *had* to have something to do with Su-Won.

Geesh, why didn't I notice before?

In the heat of the moment he felt like clicking his tongue in frustration, but held back the need and frantically scratched his head. He didn't quite understand why, but he couldn't help but feel terribly annoyed by it all.

...Hm? Don't tell me... could it be...

"I'm going to make bean-jam buns," announced Princess Yona, who had looked as though she was calmly reading her books, with no advance warning. Hak lost complete track of his train of thought, and was incapable of answering right away.

Make bean-jam buns? Who? The Princess?

He ran the thought through his mind, and by the time he found his voice it came out as a desperate plea:

"Do you intend to murder someone?!"

Princess Yona seemed to not understand what had just been said to her. She cocked her head and blinked, but eventually raised her fist.

"Hey, wait a minute! Just what do you mean by that?!"

"I mean exactly what I said."

"I can't believe it! Are you implying my bean-jam buns are poison?"

"Huh? What else did you possibly think they were?"

"Don't say that with such a serious look!"

My words exactly!

Were it a joke he wished Princess Yona would laugh appropriately as she said it, but unfortunately she looked very serious.

“Do you *really* intend to make bean-jam buns?”

“Of course I do, that’s what I’m telling you.”

“But why on earth so suddenly...?”

Just when he had thought she had calmed down and was devoting herself to rereading, she comes up with this...

Hak’s face twisted into a wry smile as Princess Yona shoved a book before his very eyes.

“Because I found the recipe in this book!”

That’s not reason enough for it, Hak thought as he sighed, making obvious his inner monologue. “Is that so,” he replied.

Princess Yona, seemingly finding this reaction displeasing, puffed out her cheeks in dissatisfaction. She peeked over the edge of the book and glared at him for a while.

“...Hak, if there’s something you want to say, say it now.”

“I don’t. Aren’t *you* the one who has something to say?”

“W-What do you mean?”

Though she had so evidently stuttered it seemed Princess Yona still intended to keep up her pretence this late in the game.

On top of being a sore loser just how difficult can she get?

However Princess Yona was a very honest person at heart, so if he tackled her head-on he was sure to win. Hak seized the opportunity and took the book from her, looking her in the eyes.

“Are you really one to think of making buns just because you’ve found the recipe in a book? The Princess *I*

know would have said something like, 'I feel like eating them now, so bring me some!'"

"...Was that supposed to be an impression of me?"

"I'm quite good, aren't I? Would you like me to put up a performance for Lord Su-Won too?"

By way of retaliation to her previous evasion, Hak purposely dropped Su-Won's name in. The effect was stupendous, and Princess Yona's face lit up like gunpowder in less than a second.

"Don't you *dare*!"

"In that case please tell me why you so suddenly decided you wanted to make bean-jam buns."

"...simple bean-jam bun..."

"Say again?"

"I said, if I'm to be married one day I must at least know how to make a simple bean-jam bun!"

Who would, and to whom? In what circumstances?

This explained nothing, and all Hak could do was patiently coach the whole thing out of her. By the time he had understood the whole story Princess Yona had regained her composure, but Hak was now completely exhausted, and he slammed his forehead against the table.

"Kya?! Are you okay, Hak?"

"Yes, sort of..."

"R-Really? It made a really loud sound..."

Hak scowled as he heard Yona's concerned voice.

I can't believe she's doing this for such a stupid reason...

Being capable of making bean-jam buns as indispensable skills if one was to marry was nothing but court lady gossip. Princess Yona, who had by mere chance heard it, had thus thought of making some herself. One could say this was rather innocently sweet of her, but surely

it was not just Hak who thought she should first learn to do other things. Like how to be graceful, or how to be graceful, *or how to be graceful*.

And to begin with Princess Yona will never actually have the chance to step into a kitchen!

Leaving aside whether she was aware of this herself or not, Princess Yona looked as though this was weighing on her rather heavily – as if the world would cease to exist if she wasn't capable of making bean-jam buns.

I guess it's a big deal to her...

Once he had taken his thoughts this far, Hak finally uncovered the source of the discomfort he had been feeling lately.

“...Is this also the reason why your head was in the clouds whilst you practiced your dancing?”

He meant to say this to himself, but it would seem Princess Yona heard it too. The table suddenly shook furiously, and she shouted out in disagreement:

“No! That's because you—! ...Oh!”

She caught her breath mid-sentence, as if returning to her senses. Hak slowly raised his head from the table – it was clear she was hiding something.

Ungh!

As he did he found himself face to face with Yona, who had drawn closer. Hak attempted to draw back at once, but was caught in the act of doing so and his body froze on the spot. He had assumed she would be puffing out her cheeks once again, but that wasn't the case.

Why the hell are you making that face??

Princess Yona's large eyes twinkled brightly, as if soaked in tears...as if concerned for Hak.

“...Because I, what?”

“It’s nothing,” she answered, and with a huff turned her face away. Now that it had come down to this it had become apparent to Hak that it was unlikely he would ever get anything out of her. That is, not as long as he didn’t bring Su-Won here.

Ungh, so annoying! I don’t get what’s up with her!

He just couldn’t keep up with this. Hak scratched the back of his head and took a breath, calming himself down.

“...Leaving aside the complicated details for now, can I at least ask you one thing?” said Hak, breaking the ice. Yona’s shoulders jumped in surprise. She nervously turned to him, and questioned him with her look.

“I understand you want to learn how to make bean-jam buns as part of training in homemaking arts, but Princess, cooking is not something you—”

“Geesh, you just don’t get it!”

It’s you who doesn’t get it!!

Hak somehow managed to swallow the remark that was on the tip of his tongue, and instead answered with a simple question:

“What?”

Princess Yona, expressing her anger as she always did, suddenly pointed her finger at him.

“I know I probably won’t be doing any cooking in the family I marry into. I’m also aware that’s not what’s expected of me.”

The unexpected declaration had Hak staring at Princess Yona with wide eyes. She looked different from her usual childish, lenient self.

“Then why...?” he asked with a hoarse voice. The one before his eyes was, without a doubt, Princess Yona...yet he felt as though she was someone he didn’t know.

All I've been able to say is "what?" and "why?" these past few minutes...

Hak smiled wryly, and Princess Yona stared at him with puzzlement before continuing:

"I want someone I love to eat something I cooked for them."

Hak thought of pointing out she would rarely have the chance to do this, but said nothing...because Princess Yona most likely already knew. She knew that her trying to cook something would trouble others, that everyone would panic over whether poison testing was necessary and what methods were to be used – she understood all the implications. Her position as Princess of this Kingdom called for these concerns to rise.

...Oh, I see...

Hak at last realised the misunderstanding he had made. It was, in fact, a very straight forward truth.

She is aware of her role as "Princess" ...

Combing her hair, changing her clothes, cleaning her face...these were all things Princess Yona was probably capable of doing on her own, yet she always had the court ladies do it for her. She did it so as to not take their jobs away.

So why's she saying she wants to cook something?

Hak stared hard at Princess Yona, who sat before him. Who knew what she had made out of his stare, but she returned a gentle smile.

"That time when I caught a cold and father made me chicken porridge...well, it tasted terrible, but even so I was unbelievably happy. I had the feeling it worked better than any medicine."

Hak looked at Princess Yona, who was grinning happily, and connected the pieces at last.

This is stating the obvious, but it must have to do with Su-Won...

If Princess Yona, who despite understanding all too well her own position, was still not budging a single step, then only Su-Won could be the reason behind it.

“...Could it be you received a letter from Lord Su-Won?”

“Wha—! H-How did you know?”

“Oh, I wonder. More importantly, what did it say?”

“What did it say? Nothing special, same as always...”

“But you felt something was weird about it, didn’t you? That’s why you decided to make him bean-jam buns. So, when’s Su-Won coming to the castle?”

He must have said too much in one go, for Princess Yona looked as though she was unable to follow him, and blinked as if dumbfounded.

“Hellooo? Anybody home?”

“...*You’re* the one who’s acting weird, Hak.”

“Huh?”

“And I don’t even know when Su-Won’s visiting next. If you want to see him, why not send a letter to him yourself? Why are you asking *me*?”

“No, well, that’s, uhh...” he stuttered as he bent backwards, as if pressured by her. He didn’t understand her question, nor why she had asked it. The one thing that was clear to him was that they weren’t on the same page.

What is going on? Am I missing something?

As he wracked his brains in search of an answer, he remembered her words from just moments ago.

“...*Is this also the reason why your head was in the clouds whilst you practiced your dancing?*”

“*No!* That’s because you—! ...*Oh!*”

That must have meant that *he* was the reason for it. And just now she had told him *he* was the one acting weird.

So the Princess thought I was acting weird... and decided to make bean-jam buns...?

The answer waiting for him after further thinking the matter over was something very propitious for him. No, it was too good to be true. In fact, one could say he was being conceited.

...It's best if I have her deny it right away.

He would never figure out the truth just by running ideas through his mind in a frenzy. He hardened his abdomen, making sure his voice wouldn't tremble pathetically, and slowly opened his mouth.

“Could it be you were thinking of making the bean-jam buns for me?”

“Yeah, I was.”

Her tone was rather offhand, but Princess Yona had, without a doubt, nodded.

“What?” mumbled Hak in disbelief, not trusting what his ears had heard or what his eyes had seen.

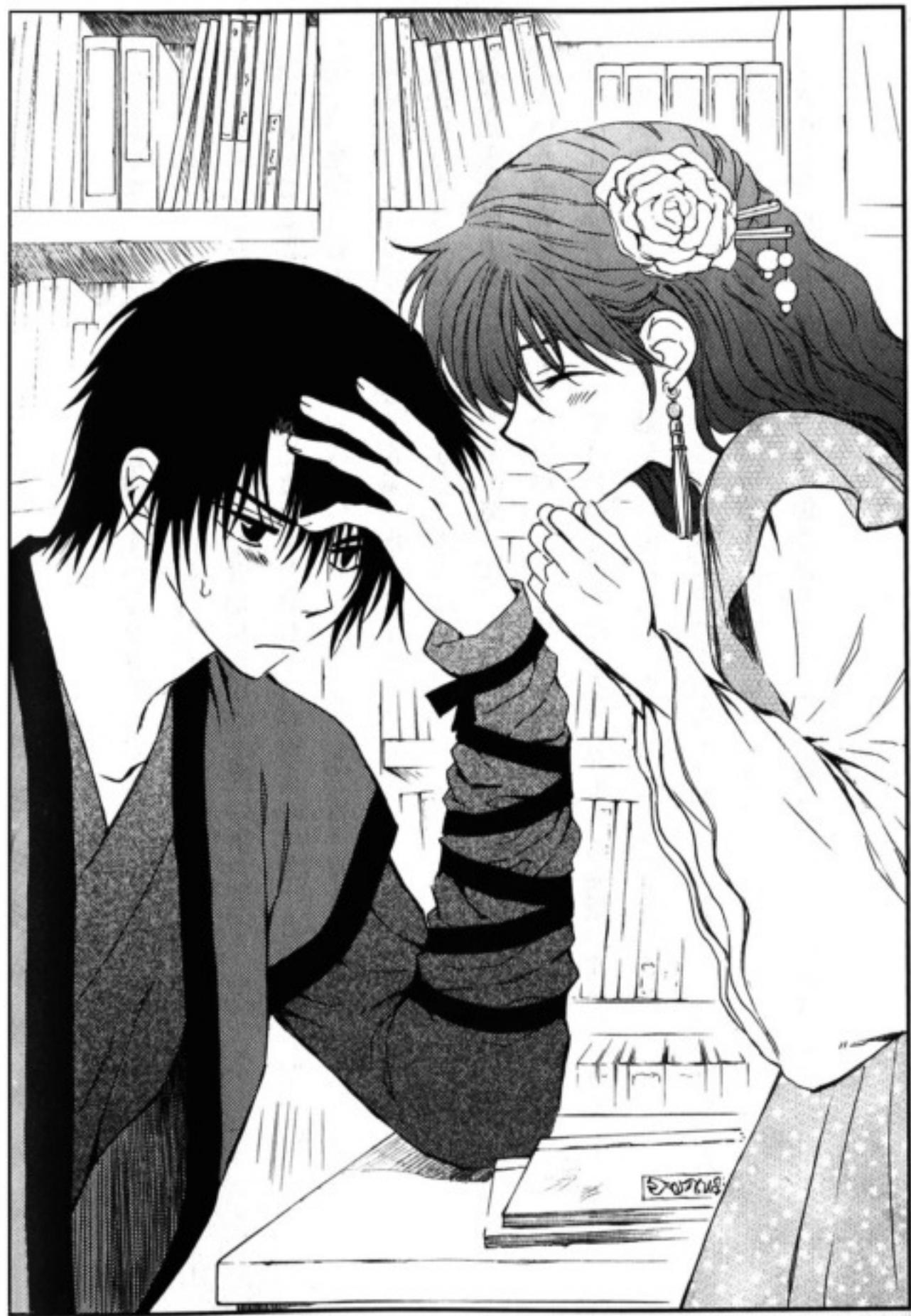
“Why? Do you have a problem with it?”

“No, but... what's up with you...?” his voice trailed off at the very end. He felt a tremendous wave of fatigue race through his whole body, and fell flat onto the table.

Is this what they call a plot twist?

When she had said she wanted someone she loved to eat something she had cooked for them, the “love” she had spoken of was of a different sort. He should have realised the moment she brought up the story of when His Majesty made her chicken porridge that Princess Yona wasn't speaking of romantic love, but of affection.





"Oh, don't tell me you're feeling shy? You are, aren't you?" said Princess Yona in a merry tone, sounding awfully happy about it.

Hak frowned and raised his head.

"Why bean-jam buns?"

He was blatantly changing the subject, but Princess Yona did not make fun of him.

"Well," she answered still smiling, her cheerful voice resounding, "because you like them, don't you Hak?"

"...I don't dislike them, no."

"I knew it! You always look so happy whilst eating the bean-jam buns my father gives you!"

"That's because they *actually taste nice*, you know? I'm happy because they *taste nice*."

Which was why he would like to not have to try Princess Yona's creations. Hak was trying very hard to imply this, but Princess Yona's will would bend to nothing. She dragged him with her to the kitchen, and after being forced to help her make the bean-jam buns for many hours, he tasted, in its most literal sense, tragedy.

*

A rumour spread around the castle that day: that the bean-jam buns Princess Yona had made had all been eaten by her bodyguard. It eventually reached His Majesty's ears, and Hak was immediately summoned.

"Were Yona's bean-jam buns tasty? They surely must have been."

His Majesty sat on the imperial throne, smiling casually as always. However at first glance Hak was able to see

through his smile and find what was hidden behind – as the father of a single daughter, and not as the ruler of a kingdom, he was an open book. If one were to put it bluntly, one could say he was nothing but any other doting parent.

The correct way to answer was, undoubtedly, to say they had been very tasty indeed. Hak was well aware of this, but couldn't stop himself from answering honestly.

"No, they were horrible, Your Majesty."

"Hm? What was that? Did you just say you didn't want dinner tonight?"

He had wanted to describe the nightmare that had taken place in the kitchen earlier that day, but was cut off by His Majesty. To top it off, he even told him he wouldn't be getting any food unless he praised her. However Hak knew King Il was not the sort of man to starve someone, and that this was probably, maybe, most likely, just an empty threat. He felt the urge to turn around and run away, but thinking it immature he abandoned the idea.

The only times King Il acted this way were when the matter at hand had something to do with Yona.

"...We did save you some, Your Majesty."

"What?! You did?! You should have told me so earlier!"

"So, am I allowed to have dinner tonight?"

"Of course you are! You mustn't skip any meals!"

This man was just too predictable. Hak sighed, exhausted, but his lips cracked an involuntary smile. It was all just too amusing.

And at the same time, he couldn't help but wish. Wish that this man could spend but a few minutes every day not as a King, but as a father.



4

Awaiting Hak and Yun as they returned from their shopping were Kija and Zeno, standing firm and stubborn. Shin-ah and Jae-ha were apparently helping Yona in getting everything ready for dinner, and when Yun and Hak arrived they suddenly stopped what they were doing to stare at them silently.

What the—?! What's with the atmosphere around here??

The permeating air around them, so evidently warning trouble was to come, was enough to make him want to turn around and go back the way he came. Its source, Kija, stood silently glaring at him, mouth tightly sealed.

Yun looked at Jae-ha, pleading for help, but after hearing what resembled the explosive sound one makes when bursting into laughter, Jae-ha immediately looked away. Prone to laughing at the drop of a hat, he had most likely attempted to keep a straight face and failed epically at it.

“Oh my,” said Yona from behind Jae-ha, knife in hand, seemingly noticing them. Yun waited patiently for her to say something else, but in the end all Yona did was return her attention to the ingredients she was handling.

Shin-ah, who stood beside her, nervously began looking left and right, clearly worried.

Oh Shin-ah, you are my only solace...

He couldn't possibly worry the kind-hearted Shin-ah so unnecessarily. Yun nodded at him, conveying there was no need to panic, and took a step forwards.

“You are late! *Very* late!” Kija spat out immediately with a piercing voice. He folded his arms, and with a stern look the likes of which he rarely made he glared at them.

“Did you get lost on your way~?” followed the always carefree Zeno, wearing his usual lenient smile. It was highly likely he was just copying Kija playfully on a whim.

Ungh, this is so bothersome...

He was already tired; was it *really* necessary to deliver this finishing blow? Yun’s face twitched with annoyance, but he refrained from dealing with this recklessly and driven by his emotions.

It was clearer than day that Kija would have him explaining things until he was satisfied with the answer – his experience thus far told him so.

Well then, where should I begin?

Yun looked sideways at Hak, and just as he did their eyes met. *I’m leaving this to you*, the voice in his heart seemed to say, and though reluctant Yun nodded back. Hak then raised his chin, turned to the tent and briskly walked away.

“Hey! I have yet to hear your excuse!”

“I can’t believe it, he wants an ‘excuse’...alright, I’ll explain things to you,” Yun said with an annoyed crooked smile, yet he still went ahead and explained what had happened. He told him about the little girl they had found crying on their way back from shopping, and how she had asked them to rescue a boy and a little kitten that were stuck up a tree.

Once finished this brief narration of the facts, Kija nodded approvingly. At this reaction, Jae-ha, incapable of holding it in any longer, burst into laughter and had the knife in his hand confiscated by Shin-ah.

“...In other words, you weren’t late because you were fooling around.”

“All’s well that ends well! We were considering heading out to look for you if you didn’t come back soon!”

“W-wha-wha?!” exclaimed Kija, flying into a panic at Zeno’s offhanded remark. However he soon pulled himself together, and after conspicuously clearing his throat continued:

“That’s because I didn’t think having just Hak with you was enough. Let this be a lesson for all, and take me with you next time.”

“I agree. Otherwise Hakuryū’s gonna go bald from all this worry.”

“N-No way...! Yun, take a look at me! Is my hair still there? Is it still there?!”

On the verge of tears and holding his head with both hands, Kija came rushing towards him. Not only that, but Yun saw Zeno following after him, and in an instant decided it was time to use his secret weapon:

“Sit! Or else you’re having no dinner tonight!”

*

Though troubles followed one after the other, they somehow managed to prepare dinner. By the time Yun had actually managed to pick up the knife he was already completely burned out, but he at least found some salvation in the fact that Yona and the others had taken care of most of the preparations.

“By the way Yun, what’s that bag that’s hanging from your waist?” inquired Jae-ha as if he had suddenly remembered to ask, adding wood to the fire as he did.

Even Shin-ah, whom had Ao resting on his shoulder and was feeding her some grilled fish, spoke up, “...It smells like something sweet.”

“Huh? Oh, I completely forgot about it. Yuno gave us some bean-jam buns as thanks.”

Though the bag had hung from his waist as he cooked, Yun had altogether forgotten it was there. The moment he loosened the cord, Kija and Zeno exclaimed cheerfully.

“Unbelievable! It looks like we’re having dessert after dinner tonight!”

“I haven’t had bean-jam buns in forever~”

However their remarks were met by Yona’s reprimanding voice.

“They’re not yours guys, they belong to Yun and Hak.”

“It’s okay, Yona. There’s enough for everyone to have one.”

Just as Yun rose up to distribute them, Ao cried out as if in self-assertion, “Pukkyu—!”

“Of course there’s some for you too, Ao,” laughed Yun as he swung the bag, and Ao sat back down on Shin-ah’s shoulder, her sigh of relief loud enough to be heard. Yona and Yun looked at each other and laughed.

“Ao’s not really a picky eater, but it looks like she’s especially fond of sweet things.”

“She is. She’s always the first to stuff herself when we find fruit in the forest.”

As soon as they said this Ao came rushing towards them. Yun smiled wryly, and held out the jam bun he’d split in half.

“It’s quite packed with bean jam, so it’s very heavy. Careful not to drop it.”

“Pukkyu.”

Just as he heard what sounded like a short reply, Ao opened her mouth wide and bit down fiercely. As she chewed the piece she carefully watched the remaining half.

“Nobody’s going to take it from you, so calm down and eat slowly.”

Who knew just how well she actually understood what was being said to her, but Ao sputtered and snorted in response.

“I’ll distribute the remaining buns.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Yona took the bag from Yun and peeked inside. Her eyes went wide.

“Woah! They’re just like the ones I made a long time ago!”

“*Ungh, cough!*”

As if trying to override Yona’s excited voice, Hak, who sat beside her, went into a coughing fit. It appeared he had choked on his soup. He set his wooden bowl down on the ground and bent double.

“Oh no, are you okay?” asked Yona full of worry as she rubbed his back.

“...Could you please not launch any surprise attacks that refresh old nightmares?” he said, head still hanging low.

“N-nightmare...?”

Yona knit her eyebrows, puzzled and seemingly unaware of what he was talking about. Yun had heard the story from Hak and knew exactly what he was referring to, but decided to stick with feigning ignorance. An outsider butting his nose in would only add fuel to the fire.

“... I see. Everyone has a dark past,” muttered Jae-ha, whom was sitting on the other side, seemingly understanding. He would ridicule people without a second thought, but it appeared he held back when it came to Yona.

I wonder if Kija and the others put two and two together too...

He took a quick glance at the three of them, but they all cocked their heads sideways. However Zeno soon grasped what was happening and clasped his hands together.

“Eating the buns the missy made was a nightmare! Is that it? That’s what happened, right?” exclaimed Zeno in a conspicuously cheerful voice, not granting Yun the time to even stop him.

Kija was rendered speechless, and Shin-ah froze with his chopsticks in hand. Beside them Jae-ha was trying so desperately to hold back his laughter his face twisted weirdly. In an attempt to avoid any more collateral damage, Yun averted his eyes immediately.

If I laugh now we’re screwed...!

There was no need for anybody to point this out for Yun. His entire body could *feel* it. The intimidating aura spilling out beside him made his skin crawl. Even Ao felt the threatening air, and the speed at which she was eating dropped at once. She stopped right before taking another bite and stared up at Yona with round eyes.

“... Well, Hak?” asked Yona with a flawless smile that clashed with her voice, that seemed to roar through the ground.

“You’ve gotten much better at cooking, Princess.”

“Is that so?”

Yona did not press Hak further despite the fact he had not answered her question. Instead she broadened her smile. The temperature around them seemed to drop even further, and Yun could not help but wrap his arms around himself. Yet Hak did not appear to notice this in the least, and cool as a cucumber he pleasantly replied, “Yes. No matter how much I eat of what you cook I don’t end up dead on the floor.”



It seemed Yona's bean jam buns had wielded much more destructive power than what Yun had envisioned.

Yun's breath hitched as Yona stood up slowly beside him. She raised her left hand into the air and brought it down decisively, pointing at Hak.

"Well if you say that, I have no choice but to make some more again!"

But what about the ingredients? And did Yona even remember the recipe properly?

Many questions flooded Yun's mind in an instant, but they were overridden by the sound of Kija's and Zeno's cheerful cries and Jae-ha's amused voice. To top it off even Shin-ah, *the* Shin-ah, joined in and said, "...I'd like to eat try them too."

It had been a short statement, but there was no doubt it had doubled Yona's motivation. Yun looked up at Yona, who was rolling up her sleeves despite not even having the ingredients, and sighed in resignation.

Well, it's not like I don't get Yona's feelings.

The pleasure of cooking for someone, and the joy that someone eating what you made brings forth. Yun had come to feel this even more intensely than when he was living alone with Ik-Soo, and it wasn't just because the number of diners had increased.

...I guess your family increasing isn't something too bad after all, whispered Yun in his heart.

He looked up at the night sky, full of twinkling stars. A beautiful full moon decorated its vastness and lovingly shed its light upon the earth.